

# JEWS AND CHRISTIANS IN A CHANGING WORLD

By Walter Zander

Address given to a meeting of Jews and Christians in the Vicarage of Gerrards Cross, by **Walter Zander**

The relationships between Judaism and Christianity have been from the very beginning unique in character. They were never neutral like, for instance, those between Buddhism on one hand and Christianity and Judaism on the other hand. On the contrary, they have always been subjected to a stress and strain such as only the most intimate connection can create. It is well known that Christianity was born and developed within Judaism, that all the historic events associated with the birth of Christianity took place in Palestine in and around the Temple, that all apostles and disciples were Jews, and that the early Christian communities were part of the Synagogue. So intimately are our two religions interwoven that when the conflict broke out between the Church and the Synagogue, it immediately reached the sphere of their very identity, since in the early days of its existence the young Church claimed to have become herself the "true seed of Abraham," the "chosen people" and the "New Israel". If one looks back today on the age-long history of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity with all its misunderstandings, its injustices and persecutions, it is clear that through all these centuries those elements have been in the foreground of the public mind which are dividing, and those which are binding or even identical in both religions were either taken for granted or forgotten. The world in which the Jews lived was assumed to be Christian, and the Jews alone seemed to remain unmoved in the midst of a more and more expanding Christianity.

## **Decline of Religious Influence.**

Today the assumption of a Christian world can no longer be maintained. Religious influence has been declining for a long time. Whether this decline has its origin in the Reformation, in the Renaissance with its rise of natural science, or in modern capitalist society, the fact remains that in the West religion is passing through a fundamental crisis. Germany and Russia have disowned, Christianity officially. The coloured nations have become most suspicious of Western ideals, and even in a Christian country like Great Britain, the Churches are everywhere being challenged, and the number of those who take an active part in Church life has become small. During the Napoleonic wars the great German poet Novalis still could visualize Europe and Christianity as one. Today Berdyaev doubts whether religion has not become so personal a matter that it will not be possible any longer to call any nation as such "Christian" or "unchristian."

Under these circumstances the theological conflict between Church and Synagogue, which has played so great a part in our history, has lost its interest for great masses of the modern world, and Jews and Christians alike are faced by

new and powerful forces from outside. Moreover, in Germany the leader of the Nazi Party has justified the actions against the Church by the fact that "*the teachings of Christianity in their essential points have been taken over from Judaism.*" The fronts, therefore, are in a state of transformation; and when, in November, 1938, all the Synagogues in Germany were burnt down in one single night, and the sacred scrolls were trampled into the mud, the Church very different from the mediaeval burnings of Hebrew writings-had no share in this assault. This time the fires were lit by a force which is threatening the life of Jewry as well as the very existence of Christianity itself. As if history had rolled back to the early days of Christianity when Jews and Christians alike were opposed to the cultus of Cæsar and the Dea Romana, today again both are faced with the totalitarian claims of idolatrous states. The common foundations of Judaism and Christianity are challenged, and for the first time the trend of thought is directed towards those elements which bind the two religions together. Therefore the conceptions of the Fatherhood of God, of the brotherhood of man and of the infinite value of the human soul are taking on a new meaning. But beyond these fundamentals there are other conceptions, developed by both religions on similar lines, which are now threatened by the common foe.

Thus the very idea of sin has become a focus of the actual world struggle. Sin, in German Sünde, means sundering apart. The centre from which the sinner separates himself is for Nazi Germany the national community. There is no higher value for the Nazi than "*Die Volksgemeinschaft,*" and no worse a man than "*Ber Volksschadling.*" Das Reich, originally a religious conception, has become a national idea. Crime and guilt are measured by this supreme standard. Religious Jews and Christians alike can find no satisfaction in such a conception. Great as the national idea is, they have a much deeper longing. They aim at the Kingdom of God which far transcends any merely national idea. For them sin is separation from God, and they know that sin cannot be atoned for by political opportunism, but only by conversion of the heart; and both have found the truth that forgiveness among men is connected with forgiveness by God.

## **The Problem of Suffering.**

Another problem of utmost religious importance today is that of man's attitude to suffering. Both Judaism and Christianity have found a way to transform suffering into a spiritual victory by turning to God. The words of the Psalmist: "*The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart,*" and "*They that sow in tears shall reap in joy,*" are common to both religions, and have helped to build up the

strong foundations upon which martyrs could rise. However, beyond the significance of suffering for the individual soul, both religions have developed - each in its own way - profound thoughts regarding sacrifice and redemption by vicarious suffering. The Christian teachings on these subjects - so central in Christianity - are known everywhere. But only comparatively few know how these problems have been dealt with within Judaism.

When Abraham, the father, set out to sacrifice his only son, the son of promise, he offered all the potentialities of his being. According to an old tradition this sacrifice was completed by the fact that Isaac knew and voluntarily accepted what was going to happen. A legend tells that he even asked his father to bind him, so that the purity of his offering might not be spoiled by trembling of his body; and in Cant. Rabba I 14 Isaac is even called "*the expiator of our sins.*" The double sacrifice by the father and the son thus became the basis of the "-promise " and the "*choice.*" Its story is read in every service for the Jewish New Year, and is associated with its ceremony of forgiveness.

Another subject, important in this connection, is the Jewish thought which since early days has been devoted to Isaiah, Chapter 53. The mysterious verses: He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows ...He was wounded for our transgressions ...and with his stripes we are healed," for the Christian mean a prophecy of the Messiah. The great majority of Jews have always related them to Israel itself. "*Israel suffered,*" says Rashi, the greatest of the mediaeval commentators, "*in order that by his sufferings atonement might be made for all other nations*" ; and in this sense the idea of vicarious suffering has gone deep into the Jewish mind.

Finally, I should like to mention an interesting analogy to the Christian conception of a suffering God. The Chassidim, a Jewish mystical sect which flourished in the Western part of Russia in the 18th century, tell that God by the sin of man lost his glory, the shekhina, which since then has been wandering restlessly over the earth. Wherever a man is perfecting himself, there is a fraction of the divine glory; and when All the world is perfected, the fullness of God's glory will shine once more.

All this, however, does not mean a confusion of the border-lines between Judaism and Christianity. There are fundamental differences which perhaps can be formulated as follows: For the Christian the incarnation of God in human person, combined with his voluntary death of sacrifice on the Cross, is the redemption of the world, is the cosmic event which breaks into history like a new creation, and, making everything new, justifies the counting of a new era. Not so for us Jews. As Martin Buber has said: we do not perceive any break within human history. Neither the double sacrifice of Abraham and Isaac nor the revelation of the Sinai mean such a new beginning for us. The eye of the religious Jew has at all times been fixed upon one point; his heart has been longing for God alone, and for this aim he has taken upon

himself his fate with all that it implies, wandering, persecution and isolation; and that explains why Jewry still today counts the times from what was conceived as the creation of the world.

### **Progress in Understanding.**

It seems to me that in recent years some progress has been made on both sides towards a deeper religious understanding of these different attitudes. As an example, I would quote the following lines from a letter which one of the leading Christians in this country wrote to me some months ago: The Christian doctrine of a mediator has entered too deeply into my being for me to find rest anywhere else. Little as I understand or live by it, the deepest meaning in life is for me expressed in what is pointed out by the lines:

*'Nothing in my hands I bring,  
Simply to Thy Cross I cling.'*

I know at the same time that what that ought to mean is experienced more fully in other ways by those who do not call themselves Christians." On the other hand, so profound a thinker of Jewish orthodoxy as Franz Rosenzweig wrote in one of his famous theological letters that for the nations outside Israel, i.e., the nations which did not stand at Mount Sinai, "there is no other way to the Father than through Christ." He even went on to say that the Synagogue would therefore recognise in the Church the instrument for the salvation of the pagan world for all time.

That as far as I see is the point where the discussion stands today; but it may well be possible that the actual religious crisis may bring us to a still deeper understanding.

Meanwhile there are several powerful forces to bridge the gulf. The first is prayer. The Christian prays: "*Thy Kingdom come.*" The Jew in the Kaddish which is repeated daily, in the morning, the afternoon and the evening, prays: "*May he establish his kingdom . . . even speedily, and at a near time.*" So prayers on both sides are directed towards the same aim. Another is mystic. The soul which dedicates itself fully to the contemplation of God overcomes all separations, as described in the beautiful legend of a Jewish sage who needed spectacles in order to recognise the world in its differences; for without his glasses he could see nothing but the all-embracing unity and oneness.

The last and perhaps most powerful force to establish oneness is action; action not merely in an ethical sense, but out of the fullness of the religious heart. The Christian who puts his life under Christ and tries to live a true *imitatio Christi*, and the Jew who fulfils the sacred commandments out of the totality and the divine spirit of the Torah, they both will meet and in meeting each other they will help to create the true community of man.